





A signal box that folds:

Lucia Nogueira's sculpture

1.

The first exhibition of sculpture by Lucia Nogueira, held at the Barbara Carlile Gallery in 1989, was titled 'Corpus' ⁽¹⁾. Among the works included was a very long glass thermometer, almost as tall as a person, attached by elastic to a small but heavy cast iron block (*Untitled*, 1988). It was suspended on steel wire so that the block was about chest height and the reservoir at the bottom of the thermometer hung not far above the floor. As a sculpture, it was a precarious statement of verticality, which moved slightly in the air and registered the presence of anyone who dared approach it. The title of the show and the medical associations of the thermometer emphasised the body. But the sculpture was no representation, only a vestigial reminder of human presence – its notional heart an impenetrable block. It was not entirely easy to see or approach, but made nevertheless a strong sculptural claim on the space around it, and involved viewers in an intense alertness about their own movements. The vulnerability of the object swiftly communicates itself, by analogy, to the person encountering it.

This was a striking beginning to Nogueira's brilliant ten-year career as a sculptor. The quality of being strangely hard to see, of summoning unusual demands of scrutiny, is found in many works. Adrian Searle wrote of her early sculptures that 'There is violence both in their presence and in our scrutiny: they jeopardise us' ⁽²⁾. This is dramatically expressed, but Searle is true to the psychologically compelling qualities of Nogueira's work. The objective 'facts' that she deploys, the constituent parts found, acquired or made, may seem obvious, but their combination and the way they are treated and positioned always give us reason to pause. Even when blatantly entertaining (a direction Nogueira mostly reserved for the drawings) the sculptures hold psychological

and social complexities that evade us, and that can't be easily or quickly assimilated.

The body is certainly involved in these complexities, but its place is not easy to locate. The scale of the sculptures frequently invites our close approach, as does the presence of encrypted parts, spaces that we cannot see into. Nogueira's early sculptures are truly *obscure* objects of desire, even when not deploying containers or boxes. Their resistance to scrutiny, to being seen, suggests unknown internal pressures. What is happening in these hidden areas? Searle speculated that 'the urge to anthropomorphise is the attempted embrace of a body under attack as much from within as without'. Something is certainly going on within *Untitled* (1989), a small work made from two identical metal pipes curving out from a wall to butt against each other, with fur that seems to be produced at the point where they meet. However, the psychic energy compressed into the work, into the unseen interior, also works *outwards* to claim a large area of space around it. The decisive claim on space demands that the work be read as more than a set of simple sexual emblems. This work was included in 'Promises, Promises', an exhibition curated by Searle in 1989 at the Serpentine Gallery, which included Cathy de Monchaux's early sexual instruments and fetishes in metal and velvet, secretive saddle-like works in leather by Pepe Espaliú, and also the wild masculinism and acting out that was on display in Carlos Pazos's assemblages – I remember being bewildered by a work involving a cutlass from which a woman's swimsuit hung by the crotch. In this heated context, Nogueira's works convincingly retained their pressure and pent energy. Her skill with the placement of small works was already clear. Once noticed, they become the focus of a wide field and convey a feeling that the situation they are part of is capable of unpredictable alteration.

It is worth emphasising the early reception of Nogueira's work as something to do with the body (and with sex), because it was not inaccurate. She had started out as an artist by making figurative paintings and prints in the idiom of neo-expressionism. A delicate group of watercolour drawings of figures (from 1988 or earlier) include dark blobs of watercolour, connected by arrows towards an erection and to sexual organs. Connections are made between the head and sex. These are fascinating transitional works,

influenced by Joseph Beuys, but Nogueira moved on quickly in this period to define her own artistic territory. As Penelope Curtis notes, 'The graphic quality is there throughout, and though the early expressive style may have been progressively sublimated, its tremendous energy was only converted into expressive potential'⁽³⁾. In art-historical terms Nogueira is a key figure for thinking about how the art of the 80s (its intriguing sculpture as well as its neo-expressionism) turned into that of the 90s – precisely because she did not simply react against the expressive energy of the style she had first practised, and forsake it for something ostensibly cooler. She converted that energy into an articulate physical language, drawing on the strong British precedents in the 80s for sculpture as an experimental and empirical urban art form. In interview, she emphasised her connection with the streets, which she walked endlessly: both as a source of the objects she used, which frequently show signs of their previous life, and as a source of feelings and situations.

She negotiated the metaphorical pull of these two prominent metaphors and areas of reference for sculpture – the body and the street – and went on to become an expert in using the specific qualities of the gallery to make a space for emotionally complex encounters. Excitement and anticipation frequently made themselves felt. One area that she negotiated with wit and power was the possibility of violent explosions: a glass drinks bottle with a fuse of cotton wool emerging from its lid is half-filled with petrol but confined by wire to a corner (*Untitled*, 1989). At the Chisenhale Gallery in 1990, she set two huge ductile gas pipes firmly into the concrete floor, and at a considerable distance from them across the cavernous space, two small mercury and glass tilt switches, as used in detonators. The pipes were capped as though to contain pressure. The connection between the two elements was formal, in that 'the switch had the same kind of value as the pipes', and also mental, something the viewer was expected to make: an imagined explosion in a chamber that was left unlit except for the light coming in from one entrance. Nogueira explained at the time, in relation to this work: 'An anonymous pressure everyone has'⁽⁴⁾. There were later works showing the aftermath of firecrackers and flare matches, but she did not wish to be over-identified with this pyromaniac/explosive direction. Visitors to her

studio record numerous objects she had acquired that turned out to be too interesting in themselves to be useful to her. Her aim was to refine the ways 'anonymous pressure', tension and relation could be encountered. Threads and cables, lines of connection that bind, loop, falter, give up, or assume sudden determination and tautness, became a feature of several 'half-installation' works, including ... (1992), and *Ends Without End* (1993).

There is a persistent sense in her work that a simple situation could develop in a number of ways: as joke, mishap, disaster, connection, ecstatic release – and above all that there is no secure way of being able to predict which might win out, or at what interval of time. When looking at Nogueira's 'stilled' rather than still work, such as the definitive *Full Stop* (1993) – a wooden drum used for industrial cable, held in a corner by a metal post – it seems likely that nothing may happen for a long time, but also that one cannot quite count on this. Andrew Wilson writes that 'each of her sculptures are states of rest filled with the latent possibility of further change'⁽⁵⁾. It is in this sense of unpredictability that, by analogy, the human rather than metaphysical interest of her physical arrangements lies. We cannot ultimately control what happens within intimate relationships and in encounters with strangers, however well we think we know the person or the type of situation. We can't say how someone will respond or react, what they will do next. Nogueira's sculpture offers specific possibilities for encountering, comprehending and registering these uncertainties. In 1992 she reflected on her experience as a foreigner, specifically 'in the state of being alert all the time. You can't relax because you are not from that place. You don't know all the tricks, the little things ... If you live somewhere else, however long you've lived there, there always something new you've got to deal with. So it's like being on a tightrope all the time, but it's quite nice, because it makes one think all the time'⁽⁶⁾.

2.

Nogueira's working methods were those of a poor artist with high standards. She acquired and scavenged objects that could be useful to her, and then subjected the arrangements she made to acute experimental testing before they were exhibited.







It is a measure of Nogueira's control that she quickly came to prefer drink cans, polished to bare aluminium, over more easily recognisable Molotov cocktails. (Artists borrow from the life of the street but they don't, usually, start riots; if they do, they do so as citizens, not as artists.) Two of these cans are found in *Untitled* (1991), where they sit on a wooden wall cupboard that has been roughly painted silver. The cupboard is positioned in a corner so that the thin warped wood used to make the back faces us. It seems, and is, unremarkable enough – an old piece of furniture hastily spruced up, and two cans naked of their usual livery. The strategy isn't obscure. There are two versions of silver that make the material qualities of the world of objects apparent: one is painted over an artisan production, the other is a commodity in its raw state. The act of turning away the cupboard positions the viewer where the wall would be – which is characteristic of Nogueira's interest in the relationship between inside and outside, and in recondite spaces. And it seems to be proposed that the different ways in which these things can't be seen into should bother us. You could pry through the cracks in the cupboard, but never see through the shine of the metal. Artists get a bad name for being interested in making not very much happen like this, and art critics get a worse name for talking about them doing it – but the 'not very much' of artistic endeavour like this really is worth thinking about. (There is also a relevant precedent: Jasper Johns, who in his day was puzzled by what ale cans are, and repeatedly painted and sculpted them.) Silver remains a cultural puzzle. It is the 'colour of no colour', which seems to make it an ideal surface for commodities. It came to triumph through the 90s and still triumphs today; just look at cars and fridges. Artists are trained to be aware of this stuff, to pay the material world the courtesy of noticing it as it changes. Sometimes that is enough.

These material distinctions and qualities matter, because materials are not the slave of ideas. Another significant place where one learns about precise material distinctions (outside a studio or a gallery) is a recycling depot. *Mischief* (1995), features a line of white bin liners. The place where the handles of one bag join the bottom of the next makes a series of holes. The line extends from under one leg of a seatless chair directly towards the

corner of the room. A precedent for *Mischief* may be Giovanni Anselmo's *Direction* (1967-8), which is made by pushing a large glass beaker containing a magnetic needle against a length of dampened white cloth, which fans out from either side across the floor. Whether or not Nogueira knew *Direction*, the comparison is useful. Both works convey physical energy arrested, but Anselmo, the arte povera artist, has made the more exalted work: 'I formed a sort of trail that the energy of the magnetic fields, continuing to orient the needle, kept alive.' *Direction* is simultaneously a physical and cosmological demonstration; it seems to be unaware of the social dimension of space. *Mischief*, in contrast, suggests the indignity of falling through a chair and snagging on something long, trailing and white, and you feel nervous of your movements standing next to it. It makes a large claim on the public space of the floor with a material used for disposing rubbish. And at some level the bin bags resemble a bridal train, which emphasises all the more strongly their factual status as bin bags. *Mischief* also, like Anselmo's work, posits space and direction extending beyond the walls of the gallery, and with this a sense of possibility and excitement. Crucially, the physical comedy doesn't quite cancel out the enlarged understanding of space. Expression – an emotional situation – has been added to sculpture, but not as illustration. The drama of the work lies in how it occupies space, and in this it joins a longer preoccupation in twentieth-century art.

Nogueira's interest in tall, vertical works can also be compared with Anselmo. Michael Archer's eyewitness analysis of *Bald Fact* (1995), is precise: 'The weakness of the fabric of the building that *Bald Fact* revealed had to be constantly tested in order to see the art at all. At the center of the upstairs gallery stood a flagpole (no flag) from which a strip of almost invisible transparent tape ran to the wall at about head level – a fragile band of adhesive waiting to attract all the dust and hairs in the room [...] Stretched taut, the tape would loosen as you approached since the pressure on the floorboards would shift the position of the pole. It sprang back as soon as you moved away. Here it was not simply a case of "don't touch," but " don't even come near"'⁽⁷⁾. In 1966 Anselmo made works of thin iron rod, the height of a person, fixed in a wooden block, as an attempt to reduce the traditional object to a

minimum. These register your presence as you approach – they waver slightly in the air – but Anselmo was making a demonstration: 'their equilibrium hung precariously between the law of gravity and the strength and cohesion of iron'⁽⁸⁾. Both works involve our identification with tall, vertical objects, but Nogueira's also co-opts you as an invigilator, involves you in watchful care of what you see. This human negotiation distinguishes *Bald Fact* from Anselmo's swaying iron rod; the unpredictability of its movement in and out of visibility feels more contingent, less to do with laws.

Nogueira had the full respect of her British contemporaries and predecessors. It is a measure of her depth as an artist that her work can be seen as in dialogue not just with those contemporaries and with arte povera, but with artists as different as Joëlle Tuerlinckx (who investigates gaps between seeing and perceiving), Cathy Wilkes (whose work is prominently concerned with class and gender while being mysteriously well judged as sculptural placement and material enquiry) or the Rio de Janeiro collective Chelpe Ferro – whose *Jungle Jam* (2008) is a symphony of plastic bags flapping unpredictably on programmed motors. Nogueira's work can sustain such diverse comparisons because it is sophisticated in its awareness of sculpture as a spatial art, while being motivated by human concerns that are broadly shared but never vague or imprecise. Her drawings show this humanly appealing and idiosyncratic mind at work in a quite different arena, and constitute a study in themselves. Amongst other things, they show clearly that the expressive urges of the art of the 80s did have somewhere to go, more work to do.

I began by thinking about how Nogueira's work is and is not about the body, a prominent area of interest in the late 80s and early 90s. Much of the way this was discussed at the time emphasised blood, the medical, the corporeal: mere flesh. But bodies are also the subtlest recording and signalling devices, inflecting in their own way what the voice and the face (a specialised part of the apparatus) express. The anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote that: 'The body, as a vehicle of communication, is misunderstood if it is treated as a signal box, a static framework emitting and receiving strictly coded messages. The body communicates information for and from the social system of which it is a part. [...] To adapt the signal box metaphor to show the full involvement

of the body in communication we should have to imagine a signal box which folds down and straightens up, shakes, dances, goes into a frenzy or stiffens to the tune of the more precise messages its lights and signal arms are transmitting' ⁽⁹⁾. Because language makes an image, we can follow Douglas and picture the body as 'a signal box which folds down and straightens up, shakes, dances ...'. And we can picture the signal box itself, doing that. It is this kind of body that I think Nogueira contrived: not figured in the works themselves, but found incorporated in your own encounter with them. You take on aspects of what you perceive. Standing next to her works, you may feel vulnerable, clumsy, breakable, included, rebuffed, wary, excited, jerky. Above all you feel alert, because in the present tense of these sculptures, something is still happening.

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1. Press release held in Women's Art library/MAKE collection, Goldsmiths, London. The Barbara Carlile Gallery, a disused shop in Islington, also held the first show of cast works by Rachel Whiteread, in 1988.
2. Adrian Searle, *Promises, Promises*, London: Serpentine Gallery, 1989.
3. Penelope Curtis, 'Picture Book', *Lucia Nogueira: Drawings*, London: The Drawing Room, 2005.
4. Quotations from an interview with William Furlong, *Audio Arts Magazine*, vol. XXII, no. 1, 1992, and from Nogueira as quoted by Adrian Searle in *Lucia Nogueira*, London: Chisenhale Gallery, 1990. Nogueira's installation came a year before Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, which was made for the same space, and with which it can be interestingly compared: the aftermath of a real explosion, as opposed to a purely mental one.
5. See Andrew Wilson's essay in Adrian Searle, ed., *Lucia Nogueira*, Porto: Museu Serralves, 2007, p.49.
6. Interview with William Furlong, *Audio Arts Magazine*, vol. XXII, no. 1, 1992.
7. Michael Archer, 'Lucia Nogueira' *Artforum* XXXIV, 2, November 1995, p.102.
8. Carolyn Bakargiev ed., *Arte Povera*, London: Phaidon, 1999.
9. Mary Douglas, 'Do Dogs Laugh? A Cross-cultural Approach to Body Symbolism', in *Implicit Meanings*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, p.83.











